



## Alcimedès

Zut alors! Those of us who occasionally jaunt across the Channel to indulge in Gallic sophistication are likely to notice a change to the proceedings. Since the 1st July 2012, it has been a legal requirement for all drivers in France to carry a portable breathalyser, in the hope that such measures will reduce the number of deaths on the road from drink-driving by approximately 500 per year.<sup>1,2</sup> Of course, this policy relies upon the honesty of the driver should the breathalyser show a positive reading, as the analyser is not linked to the ignition system (as would be the case with an “interlock” mechanism.) It also assumes the accuracy of the readings generated by the devices, and is also dependent upon the driver taking the time to breathe into the breathalyser, rather than keeping it in the glove compartment next to their prized Sacha Distel CDs. Alcimedès has put his planned booze cruise on hold until further notice.

A report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association has demonstrated a three-fold increase in the number of US babies being born with opiate withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> Analysing data from 4000 hospitals across the US from the ten years leading up to 2009, the researchers revealed that such babies spent an average of sixteen days in hospital compared with three days for healthy babies. In 2009, approximately 13,500 babies were born with opiate dependency, thereby equating to 1 baby per hour. Not only do these figures provide depressing reading because of the issues of child health and drug misuse, but questions have also been raised about the increased financial burden to US society, especially in a time of austerity.

Stereotypes abound on the World’s stage, some highly complimentary, others blatantly insulting. The Italians are great lovers, the French are great lovers AND elegant, the English are sporting (no mention of love-making) but the Scottish are seemingly miserable, miserly and heavy drinkers. The origins and accuracy of such generalised labelling are questionable at best, but the Scottish Government cannot be accused of dragging its feet compared with the rest of the UK when it concerns two particular alcohol-related issues. Firstly, they have announced plans to introduce a minimum price per unit of alcohol,<sup>4</sup> thereby providing a response to the ongoing debate regarding the link between the price of alcohol and alcohol-related crime and health. Based on a current price of 50 p per unit of alcohol, the overall minimum price for alcoholic drinks will be calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Cost} = \text{MPU} \times S \times V \times 100$$

where

MPU is the minimum price per unit (currently 50 p)

S is the percentage strength of the alcohol

V is the volume of the alcohol in litres.

This approach has been largely welcomed from police and health authorities but only time will tell whether such a policy will affect drinking habits, reduce mortality and morbidity, and improve the Scottish stereotype.

Secondly, an announcement was made for proposals to reduce the maximum blood alcohol level for driving in Scotland, from 80 mg/100 ml of blood to 50 mg/100 ml of blood. This reduction will be permitted under Section 20 of the newly-introduced Scotland Act (2012)<sup>5</sup> and will go along with the recommendation from many bodies, including the FFLM, BMA, ACPO and the North Report who have all advocated such a reduction to 50 mg. Interestingly, this proposal was also made in Sir Peter North’s 2010 report into drink and drug-drive legislation, a suggestion that was rejected by the UK Government in 2011.

These proposals also come at a time when the Health and Social Care Information Centre has announced that there has been a 60% increase in prescriptions for medication to treat alcohol dependency in England since 2003.<sup>6</sup> Despite this increase, only 1 in 18 alcoholics are receiving treatment for their addiction.

The Crime and Courts Bill reached the Committee Stage in the House of Lords in early July 2012. If eventually enacted, this far-reaching piece of legislation will *inter alia* see the abolition of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA).<sup>7</sup> Section 27 relates to drugs and driving and addresses the complex area of controlled drugs being found in the blood of individuals driving or in charge of a motor vehicle: it proposes that he or she “*is guilty of an offence if the proportion of the drug in D’s blood or urine exceeds the specified limit for that drug.*” Arguably, the “specified limit” is liable to be the cause of much debate in the Courts as the absorption, distribution, metabolism and excretion of drugs varies so markedly between individuals.

For many people, organ donation remains a highly emotive subject which can be very divisive, even for healthcare professionals. A shortage of supply of organs is unfortunately a worldwide problem which has not infrequently resulted in the involvement of underhand and criminal elements to help meet the demand for

organs, often with the exploitation of the most vulnerable members of society.

However, the Welsh Assembly has decided to take a lead on the issue of organ shortages by announcing proposals for Wales to adopt an opt-out scheme for organ donation,<sup>8</sup> i.e. it will be assumed that an individual has provided consent to organ donation unless he or she has gone to the trouble of registering an objection during their lifetime. The suggestion followed preliminary studies that implied widespread support for the idea.

Although the plans are at an early stage of development, with the final public consultation ending on 10th September 2012, it is anticipated that the law will be introduced in Wales in 2015.

One of the World's most infamous, tragic and bizarre stories to hit the headlines occurred in the Australian outback in 1980, when a baby girl, Azaria Chamberlain, disappeared while on a camping trip with her parents to Uluru (Ayers Rock). Her parents alleged that she had been abducted by dingoes and, not surprisingly, the case became known as the "Dingo baby case." Azaria's disappearance divided the media as well as public opinion across the globe.

Although Azaria's body was never found, her mother, Lindy, was convicted of her murder and spent three years in prison before winning an appeal after a piece of Azaria's clothing was found in an

area full of dingo lairs. However, it was only in June 2012 that a final legal pronouncement was made regarding Azaria's disappearance: the Coroner for Northern Territory declared that Azaria was legally dead and a death certificate would be finally issued.<sup>9</sup> Had she survived, she would have been 32 years old.

## References

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